

# Korea-Japan GSOMIA Survives Amid Disputes over Historical, Trade Issues

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**By Terrence Matsuo**

The General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) between South Korea and Japan appears to have survived for another year, although Seoul repeated on Monday its right to dissolve the deal at any time. Reauthorization of the GSOMIA was in doubt as bilateral relations remain tense over historical issues related to disputes stemming from Imperial Japanese control of the Korean Peninsula.

South Korea made no positive announcement on the GSOMIA, and instead emphasized that the deadline for announcing termination was no longer necessary. “[Korea and Japan] have understood that the Korean side has the right to reactivate the termination notice at any time,” said the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, according to the Yonhap news service. “Both sides have confirmed this understanding.”

For their part, Japanese officials stressed that the agreement supports greater coordination between Tokyo and Seoul. The Jiji wire service quoted Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga saying at a press conference that Japan believes “it is important that (the accord) is managed with stability in view of the security environment.”

Experts say that this decision was a prudent choice, amid tense relations between South Korea and Japan. “Making a positive, proactive statement about the reauthorization would have drawn more political attention,” said Kathryn Botto, a research analyst at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington. “GSOMIA is intended to be renewed automatically – under normal circumstances, that wouldn’t require a strong pronouncement.”

Signed in 2016, South Korea almost let the GSOMIA lapse last year amid the larger deterioration in bilateral relations with Japan. In August of 2019, the Moon administration announced it would not continue the agreement with Japan, after Tokyo imposed export restrictions on South Korea. Deputy Director Kim You-geun of the South Korean National Security Council was quoted by Yonhap as saying the export restrictions resulted in a “grave change in security cooperation circumstances between the two nations.”

But hours before GSOMIA officially lapsed in November 2019, South Korea reversed course and renewed the agreement. It did so on the condition that South Korea retained the right to end the pact at any time. Pointing to that decision, The Korea Times quoted South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesman Kim In-chul as saying earlier this month that “The concept of extending the pact every year no longer applies.”

As noted in a previous post for this blog by Nayoon Lee, the goal of GSOMIA was to allow information to be shared directly between South Korea and Japan, without having to be routed through the U.S. first. In an email interview before the Monday non-announcement, Col. David Maxwell, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies warned: “This dissolution will make bilateral intelligence inefficient and it will cause both South Korea and Japan to depend on the U.S. as the ‘middle man’ to share information.”

Speculation over the reauthorization of GSOMIA began after a South Korean court started the process to liquidate shares held by Nippon Steel Corp. in a joint venture with POSCO, a South Korean steel manufacturer. Yonhap reported on August 3 that the Pohang branch of the Daegu District Court made the announcement, which Kyodo reported Nippon Steel immediately appealed. On August 17, the service reported that although the Pohang court denied the appeal, it automatically moves up to the district court level as part of the normal South Korean judicial procedure.

While no change in the status of the information agreement was made on Monday, experts warn that it is still not out of the woods. South Korea maintaining GSOMIA is “hard to predict, but largely due to how Japan reacts to the Korea Supreme Court implementing seizure of Japanese company assets due to wartime slave labor cases,” said Bruce Klingner, a senior research fellow at the Heritage Foundation.

The Japanese government has warned that it will take retaliatory actions on behalf of Nippon Steel if such actions are taken. Kyodo reported that CCS Suga said earlier this month that “all options” are on the table, with unnamed sources floating measures such as further tariffs on South Korea, recalling Ambassador Koji Tomita, and visa restrictions on South Korean citizens.

Thus dissolving the military information sharing agreement remains a viable lever by South Korea “because it is one of the few that it has,” said Brad Glosserman, deputy director for the Center for Rule Making Strategies at Tama University in Japan. “I don’t think Seoul feels that Tokyo would be sufficiently motivated if it tried other levers,” he said in an email.

But he added that ending the agreement would likely backfire on South Korea. “It will make Japan angry, confirm to them that South Korea is not to be trusted, and do damage to trilateral defense cooperation,” Deputy Director Glosserman said. “Ultimately, Japan feels South Korea needs it more than it needs South Korea.”

With the wider bilateral relationship stuck in the doldrums, experts expect the GSOMIA will remain in a precarious position. “GSOMIA has been so enmeshed in politics and public discourse in both Seoul and Tokyo over the past year that it’s difficult to insulate it [from political pressure],” said Ms. Botto. She said that concrete examples of how the agreement benefits national security for both South Korea and Japan might be helpful in walling it off from politics on both sides. “However, the agreement hasn’t actually been utilized much, and it’s hard to provide an illustrative example for the public of how direct information sharing benefits each country’s respective security interests,” Ms. Botto added.

While the GSOMIA is ostensibly a bilateral deal between Seoul and Tokyo, experts say that Washington has its own role to play in maintaining the agreement because of its importance to trilateral security cooperation. “Information sharing is vital,” said Deputy Director Glosserman. “The U.S. officials I talked to are angry that GSOMIA is being used as a tool and disappointed as well.”

“The U.S. should be involved in behind-the-scenes messaging to both countries, giving stern messages to facilitate progress toward resolution,” recommended Mr. Klingner. “Unfortunately, the Trump administration has adopted a more hands-off approach.”

As the world commemorates the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II, dealing with the legacy of Imperial Japan’s occupation of the Korean Peninsula remains a significant barrier to bilateral cooperation. At the government level, experts note that patience is thin on both sides. “In each capital, senior policymakers emphasize to U.S. counterparts that there is ‘Korea fatigue’ or ‘Japan fatigue’ given the repeated cyclical flare-ups in tensions resulting from lingering historic animosities,” said Mr. Klingner.

It remains to be seen whether or not political leadership on either side can move the bilateral relationship between Seoul and Tokyo past its lowest point in decades. “There is no solution to these historical issues,” said Col. Maxwell, “but it is only through decisive leadership of both Abe and Moon that they can manage the issues which are in the best interests of both countries.”

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